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ABSTRACT

Employers believe high school graduates have inadequate reading, writing, math, thinking, and communication skills. A declining number of good jobs for first-time workers can be attributed to employers' focus on retraining their remaining employees or in recruiting skilled and otherwise qualified workers who were laid off because of other organizations' downsizing efforts. A number of studies have been conducted to determine whether vocational education programs prepare students with those skills valued by employers. Most surveys in which employers compare employees who are vocational-technical graduates with general high school graduates reveal greater employer satisfaction with vocational-technical backgrounds. The appropriateness of the level of vocational-technical preparation desired by employers seems to vary depending upon the size of the organization each employer represents. Recommendations to ensure that vocational education will continue to deliver graduates who have the competencies demanded of the changing work force include teaching basic and technical skills and offering apprenticeship options. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Employers' Expectations of Vocational Education

by Bettina A. Lankard

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Today's employers, and society in general, are facing the economic challenge of succeeding in a very competitive world market. Attempting to become more efficient and productive, organizations are restructuring their management, operating, and production processes, activities that in many cases have resulted in downsizing and in adoption of new technologies. Although seen as positive strategies for survival and success, these organizational changes have implications for the current and future work force. For one, they are bringing to the forefront a new list of "priority" skills employees will need to make the transition from school to work. This *Digest* details the skills employers want their workers to possess, examines employers' perceptions of vocational education's effectiveness in developing those skills, and presents recommendations for enhancing the preparation of youth and adults for employment.

What Employers Want

"What I want in a new worker, no high school can supply—a twenty-six-year-old with three previous employers" (Zemsky 1994, p. 5). This statement reflects the views of many employers who are discouraged with the work ethic and skills of young adults. In focus groups of large and small employers in eight cities across the country, "employer laments incorporated the perennial concerns of older people for a generation that must inevitably replace them: young people lack discipline; they expect to be catered to; they don't want to do the dirty jobs; they don't respect authority . . . they are neither numerate nor literate; they can't make change; they don't understand the importance of providing customer service" (ibid.). In a Business and Industry Forum conducted by the South Carolina Council on Vocational Technical Education (1990), one employer representative from the E. I. DuPont de Nemours & Co. stated that he has to interview 1,500 people for every 10 qualified employees he hires. A skills gap between employer needs and worker skills was also perceived by 69.4% of employers in a North Carolina study (Vasu and Frazier 1989) who were asked to evaluate the skills possessed by graduates of the state's educational institutions. Of the surveyed employers, 46.1% believe that high school graduates have inadequate reading skills. Other skills reported to be inadequate were writing (51.8%), math (48.2%), thinking (40%), and communication (51.2%).

These criticisms of today's youth are especially significant as they reflect absence of the very skills employers want and expect schools to provide in their students. They also give substance to employers' attraction to applicants who have work experience, who have demonstrated through their employment history that they have good job performance skills, verbal and math skills, and interpersonal skills. In the currently tight labor market, these practices are resulting in a declining number of good jobs for first-time workers.

Zemsky (1994) notes the "chilling effect that the current absence of labor demand" had on the focus group discussions of large and small employers in the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce study. "Among the participants from large firms, particularly in the older cities experiencing the greatest downsizing of large-scale manufacturing enterprises, there was a note of gallows humor—firms that had not hired since 1990; enterprises that had halved their work forces in the last five years; established companies on the verge of bankruptcy" (p. 4). Employers in the focus groups indicated their focus is on retraining their remaining employees or in recruiting skilled and otherwise qualified workers who were laid off because of other organizations' downsizing efforts.

The increased competition for jobs, which has extended the school-to-work transition time of teenaged youth, necessitates that high school students be prepared to meet employer demands if they hope to become employed. The question is "Does vocational education prepare students with these skills valued by employers?" A number of studies have been conducted in an attempt to answer this question.

What Vocational Education Provides

Most surveys in which employers compare employees who are vocational-technical graduates with those who are general high school graduates reveal greater employer satisfaction with vocational-technical backgrounds. In a study of 53 supervisors in private and public sector organizations in Central Ohio, supervisors were asked to comment on 16 aspects of productivity in relation to vocational-technical preparation. A majority of supervisors considered vocational-technical graduates superior on one indicator—preparation for work. On the other 15 indicators of productivity, 25-48% thought that vocational-technical graduates were more productive than other persons. The five indicators for which vocational-technical graduates compared most favorably were additional responsibility, teamwork, preparation for work, quality of products/services, and adaptability. Indicators for which vocational-technical graduates compare least favorably were motivating other workers; requiring less direct supervision; ability to learn new skills; regular, prompt attendance; and personal discipline (Schroeder 1990).

Similar conclusions were reached in a Tennessee study reported by Petty et al. (1989). The data from that study of employer ratings of vocational education graduate effectiveness showed business and industry and local communities as supportive of vocational education. Employers surveyed for the study indicated that recent secondary vocational graduates had better entry-level work skills than recent graduates without vocational education. "This may relate to the opinion of 80.5% of respondents that secondary vocational education is necessary to help provide a well-trained labor force for the future" (p. 30). In a study of rural employers' views on the transition from high school to work, Favero (1992) reports that "35% of the employers were 'highly satisfied' with qualifications of votech applicants as compared to 12.6% who were 'highly satisfied' with high school applicants" (p. 59).

The appropriateness of the level of vocational-technical preparation desired by employers seems to vary depending upon the size of the organization each employer represents. A study by McNelly and others (1991) showed that "small- and large-sized firms valued secondary vocational-technical programs as a source for finding entry-level employees above other sources. The medium-sized firms valued postsecondary (programs) above the other sources" (p. 36). "The majority of small- and medium-sized firms valued a high school diploma over other types of listed educational backgrounds. The larger firms valued two-year technical community college degrees" (p. 38). In general, however, employers consistently rated secondary vocational-technical graduates over other entry-level employees. If vocational education is currently viewed as positive by hiring employers, how can vocational educators ensure that the same opinions will hold true in the future and that vocational education will be able to deliver graduates who have the competencies demanded of the changing work force? A number of recommendations appear in the literature.

What Is Needed

Basic Skills. Students who are deficient in the basic skills also lack job-keeping and interpersonal skills and self-esteem. "In addition to teaching occupational skills, all occupational programs should continue to emphasize basic education skills. Additionally, instructional programs should include attention to teaching interpersonal skills and desirable work behavior (South Carolina Council 1990, p. 45). In a survey of 200 corporate employers regarding the proportion of the vocational curriculum that should be devoted to general education, 51% of the responding employers felt that general education should comprise approximately 30% and that communication, critical thinking, and employability skills should also be emphasized (Armistead et al. 1989).

Technical Skills. The South Carolina Council (1990) study reports that "in addition to job performance skills, communication skills, and interpersonal skills, young people preparing for jobs in an economy of high technology must have a good working knowledge of computers to be able to be productive in most occupational areas" (p. 4). To promote student development of these skills, "vocational education teachers of programs where computers are being used in business/industry should be proficient in the use of applicable software and computer operations" (ibid., p. 46). Students cannot be expected to be comfortable with computers if teachers lack familiarity with them and fail to take advantage of such resources in their teaching.

Apprenticeship Programs. The growing consensus is that the "secondary school system in the United States is too oriented toward college, thereby neglecting the majority of students who will never receive a baccalaureate degree" (Bailey 1993, p. 5). Apprenticeships offer an option for moving the noncollege-bound student into employment. Additionally, "by actually incorporating education into real world situations, apprenticeship appears to bridge the intellectual or cognitive gap between school and work (or, more broadly, social activity in general)" (ibid., p. 6). An important aspect of apprenticeships is the opportunity for smooth transition from school to work. According to Hamilton (1993), "levels of serious problem behavior such as drug abuse, delinquency, premature parenthood, and dropping out of school ought to be indicators that young people feel either trapped or overwhelmed by early career choices" (p. 11). He attests that "youthful irresponsibility cannot account for the 'floundering period' experienced by youth without college degrees between the conclusion of full-time schooling and entry into an 'adult' job. It results from disconnection between education and labor market" (pp. 11-12).

Certain issues must be addressed before establishing a youth apprenticeship model. Bailey (1993) identifies three of these: securing employer involvement, ensuring and improving the quality of on-the-job learning, and confronting the equity issues that arise from a public policy that incorporates the highly stratified world of work into the core educational system. Given attention to these issues, apprenticeships are recommended as ways to enhance vocational education.

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